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## HOW TO IMPROVE OUR ROADS.

BY THE HON. ROSWELL P. FLOWER, GOVERNOR OF NEW YORK.

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THE movement for good roads has this advantage over most social reforms—that the argument is all on one side. It is not a controversial question, except as to the means of accomplishment. Nobody is opposed to good roads—the only practical question is how to get them. Several plans have been suggested. These may be grouped as follows :

1. National roads—laid out through States and Territories at national expense and under the supervision of a national governmental bureau.

If we are compelled to wait for better highways until this federal plan is carried into effect I fear the present generation will never enjoy their benefits. In the early days of the federal government there was abundant justification for building highways at national expense. Roads and waterways were the only means of communication, and good roads were just as essential to inter-State commerce, postal needs, and the transportation of troops and military supplies, as were navigable waterways. The building and improvement of good roads at federal expense came within the scope of legitimate public improvements. This is no longer true. National highways, except in occasional instances, can no longer serve any purely national purpose. They could not now be built on any comprehensive scale except by a great abuse of the taxing power. The cost would be inconceivable. The task of constructing them would overwhelm the government. It would necessitate the employment of a larger army of men than was engaged in the War of the Rebellion. It would give rise to charges of official corruption, extravagance, favoritism and polit-

ical intimidation. The people would not stand the assumption of such a heavy and doubtful burden by the federal government. The project is too chimerical and foolish to be possible of realization and we might as well dismiss it from serious consideration. The only legitimate field for federal effort is in stimulating the good-roads movement by the collection and distribution of practical information on the subject for the use of agricultural experiment stations.

2. State roads—laid out through the counties of a State at State expense and under State supervision.

There are several strong reasons to be urged for the adoption of this plan. It is a familiar political truism that the larger the area of taxation the easier it is to get appropriations of money for public improvements. It would probably require less agitation to get a State legislative body committed to a comprehensive system of improved road-making than it would to persuade a hundred small legislative bodies to undertake a similar project for their own small localities. In addition, a State road system would have the merit of commanding the best scientific knowledge and direction in the construction of highways ; it would conduce to uniformity in the making of roads, and it would insure a complete network of good roads all over the State. Moreover, in most of the populous States of the East much the greater percentage of cost would fall, not on the agricultural communities—already overburdened with taxation—but upon the people of the cities, among whom at present the sentiment in favor of good roads seems to be strongest, strange as the fact may be.

There are objections to the plan of State roads, however, which seem to me to outweigh the considerations in its favor. While from the standpoint of public policy the building of State roads at State expense is perfectly justifiable, so great a task should not be heaped upon the government unnecessarily. It is a dangerous tendency into which we are drifting—to load down our federal and State governments with a multiplicity of tasks which the smaller political divisions of the people themselves are abundantly able to bear for themselves. That tendency is towards State socialism. The more simple we keep our governments, the fewer offices we create ; the greater economy we practise, the greater will be our happiness and comfort as a community. For any except the smallest States to undertake the establishment of a department

of highways and the comprehensive construction of State roads would necessitate the employment of a very large army of State officials and laborers, and, therefore, the creation of a powerful political machine—sufficiently numerous in its membership, perhaps, to control elections. However honest the impulse behind it and however economically such a policy might be carried out, it would always be criticised as a political scheme, designed to serve the purpose of the party in power, and it would fail, even in spite of beneficial results, to appeal to public confidence or receive a large measure of popular support. Moreover, as a political menace its duration would not be limited to the time required for the construction of State highways, but construction at State expense means maintenance and repairs at State expense, and these involve indefinitely continuing appropriations of public money and the continuous appointment of thousands of road-keepers, engineers, overseers and day-laborers. I do not believe the people of any large State would be wise in saddling their government with so great a burden, or in giving their administrative officers so much political power. A misuse of such power would entail more serious evils than a lack of good roads.

### 3. Town roads—laid out through each town, at town expense, and under the supervision of town authorities.

This plan assumes the abolition of the antiquated and useless “working” system, so prevalent throughout many States, the payment of all road taxes in money and not in day’s labor, the construction and care of roads under the supervision of a town highway commission and a town engineer, and the authority in the town to bond itself for road improvement upon the affirmative vote of a majority of the taxpayers. The merit of the township road system is its embodiment of the principle of local option and home rule in the extreme application. That is probably also its chief defect. In every county there is at least one principal village or city where the business of the people of the county is transacted, and which is the centre from which lines of communication radiate to the surrounding towns. With such conditions prevailing it is of little profit to one township to expend much money on its own highways, if the neighboring township refuses to improve its highways. The load the farmer can carry to market is determined by the worst point in the entire road he must traverse. The people

of each town would naturally say : " If other towns will not make good roads for us they do not deserve that we should make good roads for them, and there is but little advantage in our making short strips of good roads for ourselves." Thus the character of each leading market road throughout its entire length is kept down to that of the worst part in any of the towns through which it passes. Such a system depends for its success upon the concerted action of two or more towns, which is not easily obtained. Moreover, to re-phrase the expression of the political truism quoted above, the smaller the area of taxation the more economical will be the taxpayers—and this fact in most cases would prevent the township plan from ever affording satisfactory results. As a finality this plan would probably not be a success, but it could be profitably and wisely joined with the county system, which I am about to discuss.

4. County roads—laid out in each county, connecting the various towns in the county, built at county expense, at the option of and under the direction of the board of supervisors.

In my judgment the county road system offers the wisest and most feasible plan yet suggested for securing good highways. It avoids the dangers of the State system and the probable failures of the town system. It respects local feeling as regards the amount of money to be expended and the location of the roads. It comprehends a territory with common interests, of moderate geographical limits, and so homogeneous in its aggregation of towns that a network of market roads could be readily mapped out and provision made for their construction without conflict of jurisdiction or of purpose, and without exciting jealousies by the exhibition of favoritism. It offers a speedy means of securing good roads, provided there is any substantial public sentiment in their favor, and would give the county taking advantage of it more good roads than would be built in the same territory under the State road system.

Legislation enacted last spring in New York State illustrates more clearly the features of the county road system. The law is simple and optional. It provides that the board of supervisors of any county may, by a majority vote, formally adopt the county road system, and shall then designate as county roads such highways as they may deem best for the purpose outside the limits of incorporated villages and cities. The intention of the

law is that, as far as possible, these designated county roads shall be the leading market roads of the county. Thereafter the expense of rebuilding or maintaining these county roads is to be a county charge, and the necessary amount of money for this purpose is to be appropriated each year by the board of supervisors. It may be little or much, according to their judgment or the wishes of their constituents. All the repairs or improvements thus authorized are to be executed under the supervision of a competent county engineer, whose appointment by the board is provided for, the purpose of the appointment being to secure intelligent road building under the direction of a scientific expert. The engineer and the board of supervisors are to have sole jurisdiction over these county highways, and the town highway commissioners are to have their own powers restricted to this extent.

Obviously, if public sentiment in any county favors improved highways that sentiment should express itself through the board of supervisors. Here is local option to perfection. But it was felt that the policy of appropriating money each year, with consequent uncertainties of action or lack of assurance of continuance, was a kind of hand-to-mouth arrangement which might not give much satisfaction and might not result in any permanent system of highway improvement. So it was provided in the law that any board of supervisors might borrow money and issue the bonds of the county therefor, in order to provide the necessary funds for building highways in a comprehensive and systematic way. Such bonds are not to run for more than twenty years and are not to bear interest at a higher rate than five per cent.

The effect of such permission is to enable any county at once to undertake a comprehensive scheme of road improvement, and to distribute the expense thereof equitably through a series of years. The cost would not fall on present taxpayers alone but on the taxpayers through the succeeding generation, who would be the chief beneficiaries. Probably the increased valuation given by highway improvement to the property would in much less time pay for the improvement.

It was realized, however, that one of the conditions for carrying out any such policy is a longer term of office for supervisors. These officers had formerly been elected for one year—much too short a time to give even a fair start to a good-roads movement.

So the effort was made to extend this term to three years. This encountered so great opposition in the Legislature that a compromise of two years was agreed upon and that is now the statutory term of office for supervisors. It is believed that this will conduce to more earnest effort in the direction of highway improvement on the part of county legislatures and permit a fair test of improved roads before the reform inaugurated is rejected by a fickle constituency.

In my intercourse with the farmers of the State during the past summer I found many of them averse to taking advantage of this legislation because of the dread of any additional taxation. When I chanced to refer in my speeches to the experiment which is being made in the neighborhood of Clinton Prison, in the northern part of the State, of putting convicts at work in road-building, I found my agricultural friends pricking up their ears; and when I suggested that if the experiment there was successful, convicts might be employed in the same work elsewhere, outside of incorporated villages and cities, I was greeted with applause—which convinced me that the agricultural communities would quickly welcome good roads if somebody else would pay for them.

Persistent agitation is necessary to persuade the farmer that the cost of good roads is speedily paid for by their benefits, and it is with the desire of assisting this agitation that I have cheerfully complied with the request of the Editor of THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW for this article. Every farmer knows that bad roads sometimes keep him from town when prices of grain are high, and thereby cost him a good profit. Every farmer knows how much time he loses by traveling over bad roads, every farmer knows how much larger a load his team would pull if the roads were hard and smooth. Every farmer knows what a considerable item in his annual expenses is the repair of wagons and harness, whose strength and safety have been crippled by bad roads. Every farmer knows how much more it costs to keep three or four horses instead of one or two, as he might with equal service with a system of good roads. Every farmer knows that his farm would increase in value if by good highways it could be brought into ready communication with village or city. All these things our farmers know when they think of them, and they know that the sum of these pecuniary advantages in favor of good roads

would vastly outweigh the cost of procuring them. But in spite of these advantages good roads are slow in coming, and we cling to our old-fashioned habit of once or twice a year plowing up the sides of a highway into the middle and calling that road improvement. The mathematics of road improvement need to be pressed home many times and in many ways before they produce the conviction which leads to action.

Except where the legislation enacted last spring, to which I have alluded, has been taken advantage of, New York roads are still maintained under the old-fashioned "working" system, as are the roads in many other States of the Union. It is needless to point out the objections to that system—the abominable results make these easily discernible. But I have tried to convince the farmers of New York that even from the pecuniary standpoint this antiquated system ought to be abandoned in the interest of economy. I showed in my annual message to the Legislature last January that the counties of New York State now expend in actual money and day's labor, valued at about one dollar a day for each man, about \$3,000,000 a year upon their roads, exclusive of the time and money spent on road and street improvement in villages and cities. This is an average of \$50,000 for each county. That amount of money scientifically expended each year would build over seven miles of good macadam road at a cost of \$7,000 per mile. Or if the county preferred to build roads faster this annual expenditure would pay the interest and provide a small amount for the sinking fund on an issue of bonds sufficient to construct over one hundred and forty miles of macadam roads. I venture to say there is not a county in New York which if it would bond itself for a million dollars and invest the money in the scientific construction of highways would not in five years have increased the valuation of its real estate many times the amount of the investment. But that would be only a small part of the gain. The greater part would be in the saving of wagon transportation, a saving in vehicles, a saving in horses, a saving in time, a saving in labor, a saving in risks, a saving in markets.

Under the recent New York law, moreover, the rural districts would have an additional advantage in the matter of expense, for, under the "working" system, they bear the entire taxation and perform all the labor, while, under the new county road system, the greater part of the cost would be borne by the cities and

incorporated villages, inasmuch as the taxpaying property of greatest value is situated in these places.

But, if public sentiment is averse to bonding, an annual tax, at the present valuation in the State of New York, of one-half of one per cent. (five miles) on each dollar, would enable five counties, outside of New York and Kings, to build each year fifty miles and more of macadam road. It would enable ten counties to build twenty-five miles and more, forty-one counties to build ten miles and more, and fifty-five counties to build five miles and more. By levying a tax of one mill, five counties could build over ten miles of macadam road a year, and ten counties could build over five miles of road a year. These figures bring the attainment of good roads within comparatively easy reach.

I regard the movement for good roads as one of the most important of social reforms. It has in it great material benefit to the people generally and to the agricultural interests of the country particularly. In the East especially we have reached a stage of development where a network of smooth highways is essential to our prosperity and growth. Our cities and villages must be brought into closer contact with the farms. In many sections the limit of communication by railway and canal has been reached, and dependence must be now upon good roads. To the residents of the farms, to the merchants in the towns, to the canals, to the railroads, to the large army of employees, to the consumers in the cities, in short to all interests and citizens, the close communication of farm and city is most desirable for business and commercial reasons alone. Good substantial roads leading out to the rural towns from the principal business community in each county cannot help stimulating business in that community and developing the country round about it. But beyond all this they are as advantageous in elevating the social and intellectual life of the rural population as they are in improving its material condition.

Fortunately the good-roads movement is a popular one. It appeals to common sense and to sentiment. It excites enthusiasm. It enlists all classes of people and extends to all parts of the country. It has already produced a considerable literature. It has secured recognition in national legislation, has brought about the establishment of several State highway commissions, has remodeled the highway laws of many States and has given stimu-

lous to practical efforts in many localities and road districts. Agitation is only necessary to bring about the complete success of so good a cause. Old methods must be combated and abandoned. I saw at a State insane asylum recently a road built by lunatics which would put to shame many a highway commissioner, because the lunatics had intelligent direction and the highway commissioners have none. The circulation of literature on road construction, the agitation of the subject by the newspaper press, the efforts of highway leagues and wheelmen, all tend gradually to dissipate existing ignorance and prejudices. A complete revolution cannot be expected in a short time, but the success which has already been attained by the advocates of good roads should certainly encourage them to persevere in their praiseworthy work.

Roswell P. Flower.